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AUTHOR Allen, Lee E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that the basic skills, the three Rs, should be considered as a means to an end in education rather than the end in itself. According to the author, one of the most important basic skills is the skill of "basic crap detecting" advocated by Charles Weingartner. Students need to develop their own critical insights. Basic skill number two requires the teacher to permit, or force, as the case may be, students to actively pursue their own education. The end result of basic skill number three should be for students to be acutely aware of what is logical and what is illogical. The abilities to analyze and synthesize represent skills number four and five, respectively. Other important skills for teachers include: helping students develop a writing style, helping students discover who they are and that they have something to say, and helping students to establish a pattern of living which is intellectual. It is suggested that the most basic skill is the ability to create. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the teacher should be to help all students fulfill their potential to be articulate, sensitive, confident and creative persons. (LL)

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BASICS REDEFINED

by Lee E. Allen

Director of English, Needham Public Schools

The emphasis upon a return to basics is an unfortunate symptom of a malaise which permeates our country today. The teachers are the scapegoats. What a horrifying thought to consider returning to the good old days of the three R's! The impetus for such a return comes from well-meaning but narrow-minded critics who, ironically, reveal the inadequacies of basic skill education.

We all remember those carefree times of the past, when memory replaced thinking, when copying was more valued than creating, when filling in the blanks was the rule and composing was the exception. Some people still long for spelling bees, work sheets, memorization, old chestnuts to read (classics, according to many, like Tale of Two Cities, Silas Marner, Return of the Native). All one needed to "learn" in the old days was discipline -- usually the teacher's.

Above all, learning the basics was easy -- time-consuming, perhaps; but we didn't have to think, we didn't ask questions, we only answered them; we didn't discuss, interpret, analyze or synthesize; we took notes and memorized them and then regurgitated them. There was no relationship between the classroom and life. Teachers never tried to provoke, only to evoke. Consequently, we didn't search for creative answers to questions because in class there were no puzzles; the values were clear. We didn't have to know how to shop, cook or eat -- just swallow!

In 1873, Francis Wayland Parker presented the following report to the Quincy, Massachusetts school board:

The pupils could parse and construe sentences and point out the various parts of speech with great facility, repeating the rules of grammar applicable in each case, yet were utterly unable to put this theoretical knowledge to any practical use, as they showed when called upon to write an ordinary English letter.

Do people really care about what Mr. Parker observed? Many parents, politicians, and educators apparently don't. The rallying cry of the 70's is "Give them basics!" Some teachers would probably welcome the return to "parsing and construing," because there is no wondering about how to present the material; no worrying about whether or not the students are interested or motivated; no long hours correcting and discussing compositions; no wasted time with questions and arguments. Perhaps Thomas Wolfe was wrong; we can go home again; history can repeat itself. We can turn back to those nostalgic, simple, silent-black-and-white days. The past always appears better because it is known, has been experienced and suffered through. It is safer too, because we can repeat it with confidence. We assume that because we are such articulate, successful people today that we can attribute this to the marm who taught us everything there was to know about nouns, except, of course, how to use them effectively. If we did suffer, it was good for the soul; we developed character, unlike the slouching, long-haired, irresponsible illiterates that schools produce today. I do not mean to suggest that the three R's are irrelevant. Indeed, they are basic; and like everything else that is basic, they are the means, not the end.

When I think of basic skills, I come up with a different list than the usual ones. My basics are necessary to survive in what is often an alien environment. But why should we go beyond the two R's? Once we have achieved basic literacy, haven't we completed our job? Can't we open the door, and kick our students into reality? Parents probably won't bother us. Most of them are overwrought about spelling, mechanics, grammar. They usually ask why their child doesn't know the parts of speech -- it would help him or her learn French. Or why hasn't he or she read David Copperfield? Or how come pupils today don't have to memorize vocabulary for the S.A.T.'s? What they should be asking is can my child write a fluent, organized, logical and creative essay? Can my child understand how to draw inferences, how to analyze ideas, how the techniques of fiction are used effectively or ineffectively by an author? Has my child developed sound reading and learning habits which will allow him or her to succeed, happily, in college and in life? Not only are these questions more difficult to conceive, but the answers are complex. Of course, we have to teach basic literary skills, but there are many other crucial skills which also need to be taught.

One of the most important basic skills is Charles Weingartner's skill of "basic crap detecting." If a student can't distinguish lies from truth, the average from the best, the specious from the real, he has not become a good crap-detector and is in serious trouble. To use more elevated diction, we need to help students develop critical insights --

their own, not ours. To do this we should follow the APP guidelines for teachers and "serve as discussion leaders, questioners, critics, and scholars, helping the members of the class to assume much of the responsibility for their own learning."

Basic skill number two is permitting, or forcing, as the case may be, the students to actively pursue their own education. Unfortunately, we tend to tell them (as in the good old days) what is good and right; and they tend to accept it. After all, we are the experts. One of our primary goals is to teach students to edit compositions for themselves and to become critical (in the true sense of the word). We want students to be able to analyze and correct their own compositions. We need to make students correct each other's writing, push them into independent projects, throw good poems and poor poems at them and have them be able to tell us why a particular poem succeeds, while another one fails. Perhaps, even more basically, we need to make our students aware of all the media ploys which insidiously attempt to manipulate people into accepting crap. We might start here and move to literature.

Basic skill number three follows from one and two. Students need to become acutely aware of what is logical and illogical. Teaching them about logical fallacies is not enough: that is like teaching them traditional grammar. Instead, they should be taught to argue logically and to analyze pieces of writing for fallacies.

Basic skill number four precedes the other skills. We need to teach them to analyze. Students must know how to take things apart if they are to understand how the parts, as well as the whole, function. They can

analyze ads, poems, sentences, paragraphs. But we should not let the students be satisfied with a superficial analysis. They should dig, question why and how, reach out and stretch their minds.

Synthesis is basic skill number five. Students need to know how to put things together. For example, after a poem is analyzed, students should be able to see it as a whole, with new meaning, pleasure and confidence. Analysis is also a means, not an end; whereas in the good old days it was an end. Questions which compare the tragic heroes in Macbeth and Richard III call for synthesis skills. Synthesis is difficult to teach because it demands analysis, organization, judgement and confidence. It is probably the most sophisticated skill we can develop in our students.

We also need to help our students develop a style of writing. It is usually there, lurking in the soul, often suppressed by mechanical and rhetorical problems. Many students are not self-assured enough to work on style, but then again many are. Teaching this "skill" is a happy and exhilarating experience, because we are really helping our students grow beyond mechanical competency, and into using their personalities as a powerful technique. In other words, we are talking about their uniqueness, permeating their writing. Of course, it always does. But we are talking about their being able to control what they have to say in their own special way that conveys not only their subject but also themselves.

Yet another closely related important basic skill (number seven) is to help students discover who they are and that they have something to say. Disorganized, unfocussed writing reveals a lack of confidence; and confidence

is crucial to success. Unfortunately, too much of education, especially the good old basic skills type, plays upon lack of confidence and even develops and reinforces it, because it is an effective way of controlling students.

Especially with our brightest students, we should help them establish a pattern of living which is intellectual -- a habit which draws upon all the previously mentioned skills. We can not let our students be satisfied with the superficial or banal. By our own examples, by encouraging and rewarding students when they are perceptive, creative, honest, wise and sensitive, we can help them to enrich their lives with a depth of meaning not achieved by many people.

One good way of achieving this end is by developing a love for the knowledge, power and beauty that literature can bring. We might encourage this "skill" by having students create literature, as well as read it, especially in poetry because it makes them aware of language, structure, inference and the imagination.

Perhaps the most basic basic is to create, for creating is the ultimate synthesis of what we know. To create is to transcend limits, to assert oneself and even to celebrate oneself, either publicly or privately. Creating demands confidence, knowledge, intuitive basic skills -- the ability "to put it all together." Unfortunately, the back-to-basics movement is antcreative, for it emphasizes limits and ignores the individual personality.

Ultimately, then, our purpose is to help all our students fulfill their potential to be articulate, sensitive, confident and creative persons. The philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The limits of my

language mean the limits of my world." Our basic goal is to help our students transcend limits and thereby become free to explore an endlessly provocative and meaningful world.